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# OTHELLO AND DESDEMONA:

*THEIR CHARACTERS, AND THE  
MANNER OF DESDEMONA'S DEATH.*

WITH A NOTICE OF  
CALDERON'S DEBT TO SHAKESPEARE.

A STUDY.

BY DR. ELLITS.

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# OTHELLO AND DESDEMONA.

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## PROLOGUE.

THE study of a great author, and, still more, the sympathetic study of a great poet, is like a journey through a picturesque country, where not only does the changing point of view insure a succession of dissimilar landscapes, but from the self-same point the impressions received are as various as the observers themselves. Unanimity of opinion regarding either the nature or the degree of beauties that are visible to all can never be attained, and still less can reasons always be given for the harmonies and discords of sentiment, which, nevertheless, are felt and recognized



as real. This remark applies, essentially, to the criticism of painting and sculpture. Laws, indeed, govern the products of the chisel and the brush and the relations of natural objects and their properties, without the operation of which they would abound in signs of their chaotic origin. When, however, human nature becomes the subject of study, it seems as if chaos had already overtaken the elements of thought. The attempt to trace acts up to their motives or to deduce motives from acts, or, still more, to foresee the consequences of either, appears impossible, and one is tempted to believe that these subjects are beyond the sphere of law. But the wider the survey that is taken in time and space, the more clearly is it perceived that moral and intellectual laws are as real and as inexorable as those of the physical world. Indeed, we learn that from the very infancy of the human race, not only has a difference been recognized between good and evil, and between the blessings that crown the one and the woes that pursue the other, but that even from its primordial condition onward, the individual first and the community afterwards, has become the avenger of crime.

Hence are derived the themes of the sublimest dramas and epic poems that literature has furnished in ancient or in modern times. It inspired Euripides and Æschylus, and Dante and Milton, and, above all, Shakespeare, who brought it palpably into action in the tragedies of Hamlet and Macbeth. In both of them "the divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we may," appears more or less distinctly before the spectator of these plays; but in other dramas of Shakespeare, and, above all, in Othello, Fate acts invisibly through merely human motives, but none the less surely and irresistibly carries on its victims to their doom. In studying this masterpiece of genius we are as conscious of two independent elements, the active and the passive, as we are in the supernatural plays. On the one hand is the incarnate demon Iago, and on the other his innocent but helpless victims Othello and Desdemona. The first and each of the latter persons may be studied separately, as one may observe the wiles of a fowler and the vain struggles of his captive birds.

It is the development of the victims' fate, in the tragedy of Othello, that we propose to

consider, and endeavor to show with what consummate art the dramatist unfolds the nobly mournful tale, and paints such portraits of manly magnanimity and womanly purity and simplicity as have never been excelled or even equalled. We design, also, to show that Othello's vengeance involved no vindictive element, but was a purely judicial act, from which his heart recoiled as much as his sense of duty compelled him to perform it; and that the love which consecrated Desdemona's passionate worship of the Moor suffered no diminution in her heart even in the hour of death.

The conflicting opinions respecting the manner of Desdemona's death are nearly all of them so opposed to the conclusions of the present writer, that he desires to persuade others to share them. To further that purpose he has studied anew the characters of Othello and Desdemona, and composed such a portrait of each as may tend to make clearer the acts of both in their most tragical history.

## OTHELLO.

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OTHELLO's first appearance in the play exhibits him as a man that knows his own mind and possesses an inflexible will; for, in spite of his personal fondness for Iago, he declines to accept him as his lieutenant. By that act the seeds of jealous hatred are planted from which ~~are~~ destined to spring the harvest of Othello's ruin. Iago had been Othello's lieutenant, or aide-de-camp, and on this he based his claim for military promotion; but, since Othello had already appointed another to the place, and gave no reason for passing by his former officer, we may fairly conclude that he lacked faith in his military ability. Nevertheless, he does not seem to have suspected Iago's fidelity or sincerity, for throughout the play we observe him striving

to make amends for seeming to slight Iago's claims, by showing him a marked friendliness and favor, which, while they illustrate his own magnanimity, paint Iago "the blacker devil."

It was not until afterwards (Act I., sc. iii., l. 409)\* that Iago "pricks the sides of his intent" with the suggestion of what, even then, he does not distinctly allege:

"I hate the Moor;  
And it is thought abroad, that 'twixt my sheets  
He has done my office. I know not if 't be true;  
But I, for mere suspicion in that kind,  
Will do, as if for surety."

Yet even then, and as if forced to the confession, he declares,—

"The Moor is of a free and open nature,  
That thinks men honest, that but seem to be so."

And while the plot he is hatching is still in embryo, he cannot conceal from himself that Othello's heroic virtues are barriers to his purpose; for, he soliloquizes,—

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\*The references throughout this Essay are to Dr. Furness's edition of the first Folio text; but the spelling, punctuation, etc., are modern.

“I do know the State . . .  
Cannot with safety cast him! For he's embarked  
With such loud reason to the Cyprus' wars,  
(Which even now stand in act,) that, for their souls,  
Another of his fathom they have not,  
To lead their business.” (I., i., 162.)

Othello himself, speaking of Brabantio's accusations, exclaims,—

“Let him do his spite;  
My services, which I have done this seignory,  
Shall out-tongue his complaints. . . .

“I fetch my life and being  
From men of royal siege; and my demerits  
May speak, unbonneted, to as proud a fortune  
As this that I have reached.” (I., ii., 23.)

And immediately afterwards, when Iago urges him to go before the Duke and Senate to defend himself against Brabantio's accusations, he proudly replies, in words that recall the dignity of St. Paul's answer to the magistrates of Philippi,—

“Not I; I must be found;  
My parts, my title, and my perfect soul,  
Shall manifest me rightly.” (I., ii., 36.)

His pride of rank and valor is immediately justified by the urgent messages he receives

from the Senate, and is illustrated, before he obeys their summons, by the calm dignity and self-possession with which he puts aside both the attack on his person and the accusations of Brabantio :

“ Good seignior, you shall more command with years,  
Than with your weapons.” (I., ii., 75.)

And presently, when Brabantio incites his followers to lay hold upon the Moor, Othello’s reply is simple but effectual,—

“ Hold your hands,  
Both you of my inclining, and the rest.  
Were it my cue to fight, I should have known it  
Without a prompter.” (I., ii., 99.)

Even Iago unconsciously testifies to the nobility of the nature, while plotting the ruin, of Othello :

“ The Moor—howbeit that I endure him not—  
Is of a constant, loving, noble nature.”  
(II., i., 320.)

How justified Othello is in the estimate of his value to the State appears when the Senate, alarmed by the news of an attack upon Cyprus, proclaims through the Duke

their confidence in him; for, no sooner does he enter the Council Chamber, than the Duke addresses him,—

“Valiant Othello, we must straight employ you  
Against the general enemy Ottoman.” (I., iii., 60.)

But Brabantio, boiling with rage at his personal wrongs, persists in putting aside the public weal for their consideration, and Othello is challenged to defend himself. He does so in that surpassing harangue, familiar to every schoolboy, and which reflects the simplicity, truthfulness, and manliness of his character, while he unfolds the “charms” with which he lured Desdemona, as in all time the gentlest of her sex, if only strong of heart and warm in imagination, have been captivated by qualities in men the most opposite of their own. No wonder that these things to hear

“Would Desdemona seriously incline:  
But still the house affairs would draw her thence;  
Which ever as she could with haste dispatch,  
She’d come again, and with a greedy ear  
Devour up my discourse.” (I., iii., 169.)

No wonder that so enthusiastic and guileless a girl should be carried away by the



torrent of her imagination, and that she should allow Othello to see that the way to her heart had been opened by her sympathy with his trials and heroism! But to comprehend the nobility of his character it is essential to observe that he had not paid court to Desdemona. The glowing narrative of his adventures had been recited to her father, and it was only as a listener that her interest had become aroused at first by curiosity, and then deepened into admiration and love. Then it was, said Othello, that

“ Upon this hint I spake;  
She loved me for the dangers I had passed;  
And I loved her that she did pity them.”

(I., iii., 189.)

Brabantio himself was fain to submit to, even while he denied, the truth,—

“ If she confess that she was half the wooer,  
Destruction on my head, if my bad blame  
Light on the man!” (I., iii., 200.)

A moment afterwards, when his daughter avows her wifely obedience to Othello, Brabantio ceases to prosecute his suit before the Council, and, although unwillingly, bestows

his daughter upon the Moor. The love of this rugged and veteran soldier for the gentle, patrician girl is very characteristic of such men as he. He has nothing light, trifling, nor even amorous in his ordinary demeanor; but his vigorous nature is subdued and softened, as was the lion's by Una,—

“The kingly beast upon her gazing stood;  
With pity calm'd down fell his angry mood.”  
(*The Faerie Queene.*, I., iii., 8.)

This episode, introduced by Brabantio, afforded the poet an excellent occasion for contrasting and characterizing the lovers. On its conclusion the Council turn again to discuss the war against the Turk, and the Duke commissions Othello to take the chief command in Cyprus, with assurances of the trust reposed in him by public opinion, and regretting the necessity of his departure in the first glow of his marriage morn. But Othello, putting aside all such pretexts, and setting his military honor and his veteran experience above all else, replies,—

“The tyrant custom, most grave Senators,  
Hath made the flinty and steel couch of war  
My thrice-driven bed of down.” (I., iii., 255.)

In the same spirit he protests that if Desdemona were permitted to accompany him their love for one another would not "the serious and great business scant." Indeed, he ridicules the notion of such a possibility, declaring that when love disturbs his mind, corrupts his pleasure, or taints his business,—

"Let housewives make a skillet of my helm."  
(I., iii., 300.)

In all of Othello's history, thus far, he appears as a man of middle age, matured by long experience, and he describes himself as "Declined into the vale of years" (III., iii., 309). He was one whose long military career and brilliant deeds had made him famous and caused him to be implicitly trusted by the Venetian State. Not a single maudlin or love-sick phrase escapes him; but as his eloquence, born of heroic achievements, had fired the soul of gentle Desdemona with a passionate love, it was nevertheless for him too deep and serious an emotion to be desecrated by any sensual feeling. In no other pair of lovers created by Shakespeare do we observe such absolute subordination of the material passion to the nobler traits of love; the faith, the

tenderness, the devotion, the exaltation, the sense of protection given and received, that glorify human love, and raise it heavenward above the merely carnal conceptions of the vulgar mind. No hint of sensuality is to be found either in the conversation of the lovers themselves, or in the Duke's address, or even in Brabantio's denunciation. It is only out of the foul and devilish soul of Iago and his consorts that such suggestions can spring. He, indeed, stigmatizes Othello as a "Barbary horse," an "old black ram," as "thick-lips," and so on; and Roderigo speaks of him as "a knave of common hire, a gondolier," as "the lascivious Moor," and as "a wheeling stranger."\* But Brabantio, though smarting

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\* Othello was a Moor, not a negro. The monuments of Egypt, from the earliest periods of its history, prove that negroes have always possessed the same mental and physical characteristics as at the present day. The Moors were not, like them, natives of Africa, but were of Oriental origin. They were in large part Arabians, and formed one of the channels through which the science and art of the East reached Europe. They conquered, and for a long time occupied, a large part of Spain, and in literature and art have left imperishable monuments in that

with the wrong which he believed Othello had inflicted upon him, indulges in no ribald language. His first thought is that the Moor had won his daughter by magical arts:

“She is abused, stolen from me, and corrupted  
By spells and medicines bought of montebanks.  
For nature so preposterously to err . . .  
Sans witchcraft could not.” (I., iii., 75.)

This accusation later on he repeats before the Senate, but never for a moment does he descend to abuse or calumny. Even when his daughter turns from her father to her husband, Brabantio makes use of no invective, but gives her to the Moor, even while his heart faints at her desertion of him. One might fancy that he assumed this dignity not to be outdone in magnanimity by Othello,

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country. Whether Shakespeare fully comprehended the distinction between Moor and negro may be doubtful, but it is certain that all the characteristics of Othello are those of the Caucasian race. It should be noted that only the villains and knaves of the play make disparaging comments upon Othello's color. It is also worthy of remark that the English in India and Australia even now describe as “niggers” the copper-colored races of those countries.

who had just presented his defence to the Senate; but his tone is that of a man who respects himself and others. Indeed, nowhere do we see it disturbed, save when he is stung to anger by the sudden intrusion and brutal accusations of Iago.

To measure Othello's character accurately, it is necessary to observe that in his address to the Senate he disclaims altogether having been a suitor of Desdemona, and, above all, that he had sought her surreptitiously. Its opening lines declare this:

" Her father loved me; oft invited me;  
Still questioned me the story of my life,  
From year to year." (I., iii., 151.)

Not only were his relations with Desdemona frank and open, but they were approved and encouraged by her father. It was not Othello that became enamoured of Desdemona, but she of him, grudging her absence from his society and devouring his discourse. He would have been less than man if his love had not awakened in response to her frank admiration and her tender and passionate sympathy, and most of all when, to use Othello's words,—

“She thanked me;  
And bade me if I had a friend that loved her,  
I would but teach him how to tell my story,  
And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake;  
She loved me for the dangers I had passed;  
*And I loved her that she did pity them.*” (I., iii., 186.)

Not a word of passion, no lover's exaggeration of his mistress's charms and his own unworthiness, but a simple statement of his grateful love in return for her enthusiastic admiration of his deeds, and her gentle and earnest sympathy with him for the dangers he had passed. To the heart of a man so eminent, renowned, and generous by nature, the fresh and hitherto unfelt sympathy of one so pure and affectionate as Desdemona must have seemed like a benediction of heaven. How free was his love of every taint of sensuality or selfishness is presently made plainer when he seeks to provide for her proper disposition in Venice, while he conducts the war of the republic against the Ottomans. She pleads in vain to be the companion of his toils and dangers. In the very first flush of his honeymoon he does not hesitate between love and duty. Such unusual loyalty of soul prompts the Duke to say to Brabantio,—

“ Your son-in-law is far more fair than black.”

(I., iii., 321.)

Immediately afterwards Othello takes a hurried leave of his wife, saying,—

“ Come, Desdemona ; I have but an hour  
Of love, of worldly matter and direction,  
To spend with thee. We must obey the time.”

(I., iii., 328.)

This is the language not of an amorous lover, but of a self-poised man, who holds time spent in love's endearments to be stolen when he is summoned away by duty.

On his return from the campaign, Othello's language to Desdemona is naturally more animated and glowing than when he was about to embark upon a grave and hazardous adventure, and he breaks out in language more ardent than he had before addressed to his bride. The very rhythm of the lines seems to figure the heaving of the sea of love that swells his bosom. Yet, almost in the same breath, he issues orders for the proper disposal of his coffers, and so demonstrates anew that even his great love did not make him negligent of the practical duties of life.

The eminence and importance of Othello in



the State at this juncture are attested by the proclamation issued in his own name calling the citizens to celebrate not only "the perdition of the Turkish fleet," by dances, bonfires, sports, and revels, but also his own nuptials, which, it would seem, had not yet been consummated.

When he next appears it is in a very different mood from any in which he has previously been seen. He is brought upon the scene of a street-brawl, provoked by Iago, and others at Iago's instigation, in which Cassio, who had been made drunk, is wounded. The calmness and dignity of the commander are overcome by the outrage on military discipline committed by his own officers, and his rage is vehement:

"For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl.

He that stirs next to carve for his own rage,

Holds his soul light: He dies upon his motion."

(II., ii., 196.)

And presently, finding himself unable to extract from Montano an explanation of the tumult, he loses patience and breaks out,—

"Now, by Heaven,

My blood begins my safer guides to rule,

And passion, having my best judgment collied,  
Assays to lead the way. If I once stir,  
Or do but lift this arm, the best of you  
Shall sink in my rebuke." (II., ii., 230.)

In this passionate outbreak we hear the thunder of the general's wrath, aroused by a breach of discipline more exasperating to him than any personal affront. That it is not a momentary and empty fit of anger, but is felt as a grave offence against the majesty of his office, is still more distinctly expressed by the rigorous sentence immediately pronounced upon Cassio, with a Roman sternness worthy of Brutus himself. In hardly any scene of the play are the inflexibility of the soldier and the tenderness of the man more exquisitely contrasted than in these words,—

"Cassio, I love thee;  
But never more be officer of mine." (II., ii., 275.)

And the contrast grows still more striking when Othello turns abruptly from dispensing military justice to greet Desdemona as his "gentle love," and answers her inquiry with,—

"All's well now, sweeting; come away to bed. . . .  
Come, Desdemona; 'tis the soldiers' life,  
To have their balmy slumbers waked with strife."  
(II., ii., 285.)

Later on, when Desdemona sues for Cassio's pardon (III., iii., 53), Othello shows that he is no toy of love, for again and again he rejects her petition, and indeed does not listen to it with any favor until she touches his heart by reminding him how Cassio came a wooing with him and took his part against her dispraise of him. He even sends her away,—having granted her prayer,—and it is only when alone that he breaks out into that passionate apostrophe,—

“Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul,  
But I do love thee! and when I love thee not,  
Chaos is come again.” (III., iii., 103.)

This is the language of reverent and fervid worship rather than carnal love. The scene (III., iii., 107 *et seq.*) in which Iago instils drop by drop the poison of suspicion into Othello's mind shows the latter to be a keen observer of human nature (in spite of his mistaken judgment of Iago's character), and one accustomed to sift men's conduct and motives. How profound is his comment on the suggestion of the tempter that Desdemona is fair and fond of amusement: “Where virtue is, these are. more virtuous.” Indeed,

the subtle insinuations of Iago might have failed of their intent had they not been suddenly reinforced by the cruel thrust, "She did deceive her father marrying you." Even this suggestion of evil might not have told, had it not recalled to Othello's memory the parting words of Brabantio,—

"Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see:  
She has deceived her father, and may thee."

(I., iii., 323.)

The envenomed arrow had now reached the very centre of Othello's heart, and thenceforth the frank nobility of his nature droops like a plant that has absorbed poison at the root. To Iago's probing remark, "I think this has a little dashed your spirits," Othello answers, "Not a jot, not a jot;" and when the wily devil suggests, "My lord, I see you're moved," the sad, stammering, alarmed response is, "No, not much moved: I do not think but Desdemona's honest" (III., iii., 249). The fine nobility of Othello's nature is wounded beyond recovery; he writhes more and more under the relentless sting, and yet even then he recoils from accusing the woman he has so absolutely loved.

He seeks excuses for her supposed infidelity in his own physical defects of color and age and his lack of the courtly accomplishments that flatter women most. But the dart from Iago's hand rankles in his bosom, and he leaps again and again from the conviction of Desdemona's honesty to the thought of the immeasurable wrong she *may* have done his love and honor, and exclaims,—

“I had rather be a toad,  
And live upon the vapor of a dungeon,  
Than keep a corner in the thing I love,  
For others' uses.” (III., iii., 314.)

But a moment afterwards, as she enters, he utters that pathetic cry,—

“If she be false, Heaven mock'd itself:  
I'll not believe it.”

There is no taint of hatred or contempt in him, only a sad sorrow such as only the magnanimous can feel towards those who have wronged them. The same earnest, longing tenderness breathes through the outcry of his heart, in which he still struggles to put away from him the vision of his fancied wrong. He would, after admitting its

reality, palliate it by insisting that while he knew it not it could not hurt him :

“ What sense had I in her stol’n hours of lust ?  
I saw’t not, thought it not ; it harmed not me ;  
I slept the next night well, fed well, was free, and  
merry ;  
I found not Cassio’s kisses on her lips :  
He that is robbed, not wanting what is stolen,  
Let him not know it, and he’s not robbed at all.”

(III., iii., 394.)

In this sublimely generous apostrophe, and in that which immediately succeeds it, not a word denotes a thought of jealous vengeance, but only the sad wailing outcry of a broken heart over his love betrayed. As his memory revives the “pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war,” they seem to pass in mournful procession before him, and he exclaims,—  
“ Farewell ! Othello’s occupation’s gone !”

So violently does his soul recoil from hating her who had become the cynosure of his life, that on the remonstrance of Iago against his despair, he turns fiercely upon the tempter, not with vituperation of Desdemona, but with scorn and direful threats :

“ Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore ;  
Be sure of it : give me the ocular proof,

Or by the worth of mine eternal soul,  
Thou hadst been better have been born a dog  
Than answer my waked wrath." (III., iii., 415.)

Throughout this scene it is difficult to discern which passion stirs Othello most, his hatred and scorn of the informer, or the anguish of suspecting his wife. In all the vehement tempest of his fury against her imputed crime, and all his scornful hate of her alleged paramour, he still refrains from uttering a word of hatred or contempt of herself, until Iago succeeds in arousing his jealousy, the only passion that o'ermasters love, by insinuating that Desdemona gave to Cassio the handkerchief that was Othello's precious heirloom and love-token. Then only does the tortured hero slip his moorings and fly madly over a sea of doubt and hate:

"All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven.  
'Tis gone."

And a moment later,—

"Now, by yond' marble heaven,  
In the due reverence of a sacred vow  
I here engage my words," (III., iii., 523.)

not, at first, to take revenge on Desdemona,

but upon Cassio, her supposed paramour. Only when this is determined do his thoughts naturally revert to her whom he now believes to be the cause of his dishonor, and extort from him the first vituperation of Desdemona, quickly followed by an avowal of his fell purpose :

“Damn her, lewd minx : O, damn her ! damn her !  
Come, go with me apart ; I will withdraw  
To furnish me with some swift means of death  
For the fair devil.” (III., iii., 541.)

The poison working in his soul makes him who had, above all things, shown himself just as well as inflexible, become suspicious and unjust. For how could he blame Desdemona for ignorance of the value that he set upon his heirloom, and which for him had become a damning witness against her, since he now, for the first time, acquaints her with its magical qualities and significance, and with stern insistence repeats, “The handkerchief ! The handkerchief !” (III., iv., 109.) Yet he still resists the tempter. His love holds him back in his descent to despair. Even while he starts from the mention of the fatal handkerchief, he would seem, when the whirlwind of



his passion had somewhat subsided, to have felt the memory of his love and faith pour over him like a refreshing breeze, and it needs all the malignant cunning of Iago to keep alive the wound he had inflicted. So as his lieutenant repeats the word, Othello replies,—

“ By Heaven, I would most gladly have forgot it :  
Thou said'st, (O, it comes o'er my memory,  
As doth the raven o'er the infectious house,  
Boding to all,) he had my handkerchief.”

(IV., i., 23.)

And then the tempter, seeing that his noble and generous victim may still escape from the net in which he has enmeshed him, throws off the mask and boldly makes his false and cruel charge. And what is its effect upon Othello? It does not sting and madden him, as it would a jealous man of the common type. As if he had forgotten everything that led up to it, the doubts, suspicions, and fears with which he had incessantly struggled, though with ever-waning energy, this blow falls upon him with the crushing force of a mace. It stuns him, confuses him, makes his words incoherent, and ends by depriving him—this strong and self-poised man, this

rugged and valiant soldier,—depriving him of consciousness. Here, at last, he loosens his hold upon the faith to which he had clung in spite of all the suspicion and doubt Iago had bred in his mind. His despair manifests itself, not in any sudden act of violence against the wife in whom his life's joy had centred, not in any answering blow to the demon who had smitten him; his anguish is too big for words, too crushing for deeds; his very soul seems wrenched from its moorings, and he swoons. "E caddi come corpo morte cade;" he "Fell, even as a dead body falls," to apply the expression of Dante in the story of Francesca's piteous fate. No sublimer picture of a great man's despair in the midst of the ruins of his wrecked life is to be found in the annals of literature.

Now that the victim has fallen into his enemy's power he is tortured unresistingly. He is made to believe that he hears Cassio's avowal of adultery with Desdemona; his masterful manner and tone of speech have faded away; and he alternates between the bitterness he feels towards Cassio and Desdemona and his love for her that will not die. On Iago's foul suggestion that Cassio

had not only received from Desdemona the token of his love, but had given it to a strumpet, Othello breaks out in alternate exclamations of hate and love,—

“I would have him nine years a killing.—A fine woman! a fair woman! a sweet woman!” . . .

“Ay, let her rot, and perish, and be damned to night; for she shall not live. No, my heart is turned to stone; I strike it, and it hurts my hand. O, the world hath not a sweeter creature; she might lie by an emperor’s side, and command him tasks.”

(IV., i., 195.)

Throughout this scene the conflict never ceases between his honor and his love, and the latter might still have conquered had not Iago “pricked the sides of his intent” perpetually with insinuated sophistry. Nevertheless, his love weakens his stern resolve, and determined as he is to slay Desdemona, he dreads lest her charms should shake his purpose at the last:

“Get me some poison, Iago, this night.—I’ll not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty unprovide my mind again.” (IV., i., 221.)

But Iago replies, “Do it not with poison; strangle her in bed, even the bed she has con-

taminated." If he had in mind the strangling by suffocation, which we believe to have been the method used, then we can understand that Iago suggested it lest in Desdemona's death by any other method Othello should behold her face and be deterred from executing his crime completely.

Presently Lodovico arrives with a message to Othello from the Duke, and Desdemona invokes his aid to heal the breach between her husband and Cassio,—“for the love I bear to Cassio” she innocently adds. This phrase, prompted by a gentle womanly heart that “thinketh no evil,” falls upon Othello inflamed with passion as water upon red-hot iron, and he explodes with the cry, “Fire and brimstone!” Then for the first time he exhibits anger against his wife, and he reviles her publicly and sneers at her. He even strikes her. Yet he betrays how full his thoughts are of Desdemona by interjecting phrases referring to her, or even addressed to her, among those in which he answers Lodovico concerning the affairs of state. But these phrases and the acts accompanying them are so irrational, incoherent, and rude towards Desdemona, that Lodovico exclaims,—

"Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate  
Call—all-in-all sufficient?—Is this the nature  
Whom passion could not shake? whose solid virtue  
The shot of accident, nor dart of chance  
Could neither graze nor pierce?" . . .

"Are his wits safe? Is he not light of brain?"

(IV., i., 295.)

The baneful suspicions that were now Othello's constant guests were changing his character and making him distrustful of everybody and of all proof. And yet, even in his next interview with Desdemona, although he vilifies her in outrageous phrases, her unaffected meekness overcomes his wrath against the woman he had loved so fondly and cannot hate, and he weeps despite his wounded pride and his jealousy. Then breaks from the deepest fountain of his heart that sublime apostrophe in which he tells her that all things else were easy to be borne, outward trials, misfortunes, even public scorn,—all but unfaithful love. Even then his soul goes out to her in the bitter-sweet apostrophe,—

"O, thou weed,

Who art so lovely fair, and smell'st so sweet,  
That the sense aches at thee,—

'Would thou hadst ne'er been born.'" (IV., ii., 77.)

By this time Iago's poisonous lies had so stained and darkened Othello's clear mind that he was no longer able to distinguish from truth the falsehoods that had been cunningly instilled into his ears. They had dulled his senses, and the sweet voice of his innocent wife no longer awaked music in his heart.

The catastrophe of the drama seems to confirm the judgment we have expressed of Othello's character. He shows no vulgar jealousy of Cassio. He had already seen him wounded, as he supposed, to death, yet he did not utter a syllable of reproach or exultation. He regarded him merely as the first and necessary sacrifice to his outraged honor, the precursory victim of that dispensation of a higher justice from which love still held back his hand. When he accepted the declaration of Iago that the death of Cassio was assured, it was as an omen to point his own way on the path of retribution:

"Thou hast such noble sense of thy friend's wrong,  
Thou teachest me." (V., i., 40.)

In absolute conformity with this, his directing and controlling thought, he enters his wife's bed-chamber, and in the first words he

utters to himself, while she, the innocent, sleeps, he unveils the secret and only motive for his act:

“It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul,  
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!”  
(V., ii., 3.)

He is the minister of justice, not the jealous and revengeful husband. His love, the strong and manly love that cherishes her as one might cherish a dove that had nestled for shelter in his bosom, is not one whit abated, and even now it almost avails to turn him from his fell purpose. He shrinks anew from the thought of disfiguring his idol:

“I’ll not shed her blood  
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,  
And smooth as monumental alabaster.”  
(V., ii., 5.)

He revolts from the duty he has set himself to perform; and struck by the likeness of her vital spark to the flame of a small taper in his hand, he is once more deterred from executing his purpose by this thought,—

“If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,  
I can again thy former light restore,

Should I repent me. But once put out thy light,  
Thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature,  
I know not where is that Promethean heat  
That can thy light relume." (V., ii., 10.)

Then, as he gazes wistfully and fondly at Desdemona sleeping, as a child sleeps, beneath the very eyes of her executioner, she appears to him a flower as fragrant as her spirit had been pure, and he kisses her, saying,—

" I'll smell thee on the tree.  
O balmy breath, that almost doth persuade  
Justice to break her sword."

For her, for his tender, clinging, childlike wife, his love is unabated. As he kisses her his stern resolve seems to waver, and he even renews the token of his love while he utters the heart-rending words,—

" One more, one more :  
Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee  
And love thee after. One more, and that's the last.  
So sweet was ne'er so fatal. I must weep,  
But they are cruel tears: This sorrow's heavenly,  
It strikes where it doth love."

Othello's honor is more deeply injured than his love, and constrains him to the deed



which is to him an award of justice, not revenge. That this was his controlling motive more plainly appears, after the death of Desdemona, when Lodovico asks of him the motive for the deed :

*"Lod.* What shall be said of thee?

*Oth.* Why, anything :

An honorable murderer, if you will :

*For nought I did in hate, but all in honor."*

(V., ii., 360.)

It was not so much his honor as a Christian husband, who would have maintained and avenged it otherwise, but rather as a Mohammedan, whose idea of conjugal fidelity was far stricter, and whose right to dispose of his unfaithful wife no one might call in question, or doubt that her taking off could alone expiate a crime for which pardon was impossible. But in becoming her executioner, love made him feel that he and not Desdemona was really the victim. In his eyes she was indeed worthy of death ; yet that inexorable and inevitable doom must be inflicted by no mercenary hand, but only by his who loved her still as when she did pity the dangers he had passed.

In this prelude to the tragical ending of the play, Othello struggles for a while between love and duty ; and love might still have conquered had he not uttered aloud a word that as a key unlocked the flood-gates of his passion, "that handkerchief." Thenceforth he loses all self-command ; the stern tenderness, such as Brutus felt, when, with averted face, he said, "*I lictor, colliga manus !*" is turned to stony hardness ; all the damning proofs of Desdemona's guilt rise like warning ghosts before his distorted vision, and he breaks out,—

" O perjured woman, thou dost stone my heart,  
And makes me call, what I intend to do,  
A murder, which I thought a sacrifice."

(V., ii., 78.)

Thenceforth remains only the execution of his inflexible judgment, which, in her innocent simplicity, Desdemona confirms by the pity she expresses for Cassio's death. This is adding poison to the barb that rankles in Othello's breast and fuel to the fire of his devouring passion, so that he hurries onward the execution of the sentence he has charged himself withal. He is deaf to her appeal for

a day's life; for half an hour's; for even the brief period of a single prayer; and as he stifles her cries, he extinguishes all hope with the sad words, "It is too late." Yet even then his magnanimous love breaks out in words that again depict him as the minister of justice rather than the avenger of a personal wrong. As his victim shows signs of reviving, he exclaims,—

"I that am cruel, am yet merciful,  
I would not have thee linger in thy pain.  
So, so." (V., ii., 110.)

Presently the summons of Emilia at the door startles him, as he is watching Desdemona's seemingly lifeless form. For a moment he fancies that she stirs; and then, believing that her life is extinct, the despair in his soul breaks forth like a lion ravening its prey:

"O, insupportable! O, heavy hour!  
Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse  
Of sun and moon; and that the affrighted globe  
Did yawn at alteration." (V., ii., 123.)

And thus in turns he is tortured by the thought of the awful sacrifice he has made

to justice; by the swiftly-gnawing consciousness that in murdering his wife he has really committed suicide; and by Emilia's announcement that Cassio, whose death he had compassed, is still alive. But worse remains behind. The voice of Desdemona, which he thought had been hushed forever, whispers to him from the very gates of the tomb, and the last words she utters are in answer to Emilia's question, "Oh who hath done this deed?"

"Nobody; I myself, farewell:

Commend me to my kind lord; oh farewell."

(V., ii., 155.)

Then coward guilt for the first time seizes upon Othello, and to Emilia's doubting question he replies, "You hear her say herself it was not I." But only for a moment does he shrink from the responsibility of his act, and in another he avows and justifies his deed, rehearsing all the calumnies and deceits that had enmeshed him and driven him to commit it. Yet even then, so chivalrous is he, so innate is his sense of justice, that he adds,—

"O, I were damned beneath all depth in hell,

But that I did proceed upon just grounds

To this extremity." (V., ii., 171.)

Nevertheless, the calumny clings to his soul as bird-lime sticks to twigs, and he rehearses it anew, but only to learn its falsehood, to find his murdered wife innocent, and his trusted friend a traitor and assassin. Now, at last, his strength deserts him; nothing is left to fight for, nothing to love, nothing to live for. The fair edifice of ambition and love that he had builded has crumbled around him, thrust down by his own hands, because he was deaf to truth and open-eared to treacherous lies. There lay the pure victim upon the altar of his "vainglorious pride." In his despair, well may he cry out,—

"O ill-starred wench!

Pale as thy smock! when we shall meet at compt,  
This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven,  
And fiends will snatch at it. Cold, cold, my girl?  
Even like thy chastity. O, cursed, cursed slave!  
Whip me, ye devils,  
From the possession of this heavenly sight:  
Blow me about in winds, roast me in sulphur,  
Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire.  
Oh Desdemona dead! Desdemona dead!  
Oh, oh!" (V., ii., 335.)

Well may Othello writhe in the unavailing agonies of remorse, and yet in this supreme

moment of his life make what atonement remained possible by a confession as remarkable for its penitence and humility as for its dignity, in which he speaks of himself,—

“Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought,  
Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand  
(Like the base Judean) threw a pearl away  
Richer than all his tribe.” (IV., ii., 418.)

The love less vehement than deep, more tender than passionate, that had made Othello's married life a heaven and given him infinite promises of joy, was now slain, and slain by his own hand. He had suffered the shipwreck of all that made life joyous, hopeful, and precious to him, and it was his own hand that had steered his ship upon the rocks. Only one perfect joy survived, and that in memory alone. With that still glowing and palpitating amid the ruins, he would expiate his error and his crime by the sacrifice of himself, and cease to live in a world from which his own hand had wrested all that made it desirable. So by his own hand he dies, with his last breath murmuring,—

“I kissed thee ere I killed thee. No way but this,  
Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.”  
(V., ii., 433.)

Well might Cassio utter the words that  
were his fittest epitaph,—

“FOR HE WAS GREAT OF HEART.”

## DESDEMONA.

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SHAKESPEARE excels all other poets and dramatic authors in drawing the characteristics of his personages so sharply that they appear like distinct historical realities rather than as creations of his genius. Among them are two women who are not without resemblance to each other in their tender age and in the sadness of their fate, and in showing how love may be the life or become the death of its votary, whether she be like the ardent, imaginative, and adventurous Juliet, or the sympathetic, tender, and ill-fated Desdemona.\* Brabantio describes her as

“ A maiden, never bold :  
A spirit so still, and quiet, that her motion  
Blushed at herself.” (I., iii., 113.)

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\* Desdemona = Δυσδαιμων = Ill-fated.



As her nature is reflected in her actions, she seems to be one who knows nothing of the outside world, but measures the character of others by her own simplicity and purity. Like many another girl delicately brought up, and almost in nun-like seclusion, she was filled with a romantic spirit, which naturally became inflamed by listening to the narrative in which Othello recounted to her father his adventures by land and sea, as well as his martial achievements. She even urged him to repeat these stories to herself, and gave him for his pains "a world of sighs," "and bade him if he had a friend that loved her, he would but teach him how to tell *his* story, and that would woo her." In this we see a girl scarcely conscious of her own love, and innocently stimulating the love of Othello. Her simplicity and candor availed more to captivate the rugged veteran than the most artful wiles of an experienced coquette could have done. In the hearing of the case before the Duke, as we have already seen, her father says,—

"If she confess that she was half the wooer,  
Destruction on my head, if my bad blame  
Light on the man." (I., iii., 200.)

This confession, indeed, with maidenly coyness she omits, but she openly proclaims that her allegiance to her husband is even higher than that which she owes her father, who presently confesses that it is so, in these words :

“Come hither, Moor :

I here do give thee that with all my heart,

Which but thou hast already, with all my heart

I would keep from thee.” (I., iii., 218.)

The very first touch that sounds the keynote of Desdemona's love is in her appeal to the Duke to be allowed to accompany her husband, proclaiming that her pride in him is not on account of his physical attractions, but for his valor and his fame. Her allusion to his complexion is surpassingly delicate, “I saw Othello's visage in his mind.” Every sentence she utters exhibits her loyal pride in his military achievements, and her fond anticipation that he had laurels yet to win. But then, as now, the rules of State forbade the indulgence she prayed for, and so it happened that she was left by Othello under the protection of his trusted, but false, friend, Iago. Later on we find Desdemona putting aside Iago's sneers at women, with a simple

gentleness that proves how innocent she was of the wicked knowledge in which he was an adept.

On Othello's return from the war she finds no extravagant language to greet him with, but only the simple words "My dear Othello," but one can estimate the eloquence that burned in her face and tone by Othello's response, which is as full of contentment as of passionate love. No wonder that with a heart so full of joy at her husband's victorious return, she should, shortly afterwards, have cheerfully granted Cassio's prayer to plead his cause with Othello. As her love had at first subdued this valiant man, so she now feels sure that it will be as potent to obtain the pardon of his officer; and therefore she does not hesitate to pledge herself to secure it, relying upon her faith that Othello loves her too well to refuse her anything. But she promises to urge her petition, not in a grave tone, as if the matter were of serious import, but in a playful style, as a petted daughter might speak to the father whom she loves and reveres, even while she cajoles him.

"Assure thee,  
If I do vow a friendship, I'll perform it

To the last article: my lord shall never rest;  
I'll watch him tame, and talk him out of patience;  
His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift;  
I'll intermingle every thing he does  
With Cassio's suit: Therefore be merry, Cassio,  
For thy solicitor shall rather die  
Than give thy cause away." (III., iii., 25.)

Her petition to Othello on Cassio's behalf is urged sportively but persistently; with unconscious adroitness she reminds him how Cassio had come a wooing with him, and had taken part against Othello's detractors. This remembrance touches a cord that vibrates in the heart of both, and the stern justice of the soldier yields. Twice Othello says, "I will deny thee nothing."

Meanwhile, Desdemona learns the loss of her handkerchief and the distress it causes Othello, yet does not attach importance to it otherwise, but bears witness to her husband's magnanimity. "My noble Moor" she calls him: as if with the instinct of a soul full of worship for his generous qualities; and to Emilia's question, "Is he not jealous?" exclaims with surprise, "Who? he? I think the sun, where he was born, Drew all such humors from him." In her next interview with her

husband he recounts the marvellous virtues of the lost token ; but she, knowing well that she has no need of such an amulet, puts aside the subject to press upon him the pardon of Cassio, in her innocence not dreaming—for how should she?—that her wifely honor and love were in question. Hardly anywhere does her single-hearted faith shine more conspicuously than in this scene. It so fills her mind as to blind her to the changed manner of Othello, and his insisting upon a thing that seemed to her so trivial in comparison with the justice and mercy she would fain have him show to his delinquent officer. She cannot understand his unreasonable harshness, and yet she answers him with that winning gentleness of which her character is all compact. When he leaves her abruptly and rudely she is amazed at his anger, and, utterly unconscious of any wrong in herself, exclaims,—

“ I ne’er saw this before.

Sure there’s some wonder in this handkerchief ;

I am most unhappy in the loss of it.”

(III., iv., 117.)

Meanwhile, when the suspicious insinuations of Othello take the substantial form of direct

accusations, she makes no revolt against his unjust and cruel judgment, but yields discouraged and without resistance to the fate which she feels is overtaking her.

As in the beginning Desdemona's love was the worshipful recognition of Othello's mastery, and his love was a sense of guardianship which in the nobly strong is an instinct and a happiness; so now, when he has turned from her and against her, and believed her capable of an act from which her very soul would shrink, she feels herself alone and abandoned in the world. She had been already cast off by her father as unworthy of his affection,—her “match was mortal to him: and pure grief Shore his old thread in twain” (V., ii., 257),—and now the lover and husband she worshipped as a hero smites her with his scorn, and tramples her under foot as a thing too vile even for kindness! Bewildered, stunned, her words become confused, and yet through their confusion shines the light of her conscious purity. But no revolt stirs her innocent bosom. Even of reproach she utters only this, that with its gentleness might have melted a heart of stone, or the still harder heart of Iago to whom it was addressed:

“Those that do teach young babes  
Do it with gentle means, and easy tasks.  
He might have chid me so ; for in good faith  
I am a child to chiding.” (IV., ii., 131.)

And directly afterwards she adds,—

“And his unkindness may defeat my life  
But never taint my love.”

The simplicity of Desdemona is also very affectingly shown in the conversation with Emilia, in which she seems incapable of understanding that a wife should betray her husband :

“Beshrew me, if I would do such a wrong  
For the whole world.” (IV., iii., 87.)

And she adds,—

“I do not think there is any such woman.”

What masterly skill does Shakespeare exhibit in this scene, in which the whiteness of Desdemona's soul seems intenser by its contrast with the blackness of Emilia's, and the unsuspecting purity of the one is set against the case-hardened, unscrupulous character of the other! Surely, not to speak it

profanely, she "was led like a lamb to the slaughter."

When Othello, intent on his fell purpose, enters his wife's chamber, it is lighted only by the taper that he carries. She had no dread of darkness, and was asleep. "The innocent sleep." She is awakened by his fond but despairing kiss, and thinks of no danger until he bids her prepare to die. Then, at the sight of her husband's glaring eyes, she feels afraid, although her conscience reproaches her with nothing:

"Why I should fear, I know not,  
Since guiltiness I know not: but yet I feel I fear."  
(V., ii., 47.)

Protesting her love for him as her only sin, she cannot, will not, perceive any other, and exclaims,—

"That death's unnatural that kills for loving."

The avowal of Othello's jealous motive, and the renewal of his assurance that she is to die, arouses no clamorous protest against the cruel sentence. She is intent only on proving her innocence with Cassio, crying,—

"Send for the man and ask him." (V., ii., 61.)



And again,—

“Send for him hither.

Let him confess a truth.” (V., ii., 83.)

But when she is told of Cassio’s assassination, her tender heart cannot refuse the expression of her pity:

“Oh, my fear interprets. What, is he dead?

Alas, he is betrayed, and I undone,”

meaning of course that he, the only witness of her innocence, can no longer prove it. Thus, again, and for the last time, her innocence becomes a snare, and her sympathy with Cassio’s supposed fate appears to her husband “strong as proofs of Holy Writ” to condemn her. Then only does the instinct of life make itself heard in the touching prayers:

“O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not.”. . .

“Kill me to-morrow; let me live to-night.”. . .

“But half an hour.”. . .

“But while I say one prayer.”. . . (V., ii., 98.)

Not a word of reproach to her husband does she utter against his cruelty, tyranny, and injustice, not one of revolt or indigna-

tion ; not by the least struggle does she seek to escape from her unmerited and violent death. But Othello's was not a skilled assassin's hand, and Desdemona recovers partially from the swoon into which she had fallen, in time to hear of Roderigo's death. It may be questioned whether her murmured words "O falsely, falsely murdered" refer to Cassio or to herself. There is good reason to doubt the latter application of them, because they imply an accusation which is contradicted by what she says immediately afterwards :

"A guiltless death I die ;"

and her answer to Emilia's question, "Oh who hath done this deed ?" is,—

"Nobody, I myself: farewell :

Commend me to my kind lord: Oh farewell."

(V., ii., 155.)

Thus in the supreme moment of her life, refused all mercy by the stern and blind justice of her husband, and dying by his hand, she is true to the simplicity of her nature and the constancy of her love. She was not, like Joan of Arc, a heroine and a martyr in the cause of political and religious zeal, with a

kingdom as a stage on which to play her part; she was one of those nobler and more numerous victims of fate, who, with serene patience and loving smiles, accept their sentence with scarcely a protest or a murmur, and kiss the hand that executes it.

The Desdemona of Shakespeare must have been of a slender and delicate figure, girlish in her manner, and of an excitable temperament, contrasting in all her bodily and mental characteristics with the Moor, whom we can only conceive of as a man of fine proportions, great physical strength, and heroic nature. The contrast of his grave and serene dignity when unmoved, with the whirlwind violence of his passion when he was aroused to anger, we have already seen in his rebuke of the licentious revelry of his soldiers. It was characteristic of his race, as much as the stolid and ungainly appearance of the Barbary horse at rest is unlike the splendid action and impetuosity of the same animal when coursing the desert or in battle. He and Desdemona were mated but not matched. For that very reason their love for each other was fitted to grow by the mutual attraction of dissimilars, as long as faith remained whole.

When that was broken, by whatever means, the weaker must of necessity succumb, and perish in the tempest raging around the stronger.

The beauty and the glory of this drama are the union of all that is noblest in man with all that is most exquisite in woman; of mature strength with childlike tenderness; of a rugged soldier's life with the delicacies of a closely-guarded home; of knowledge gained by adventurous experience with the artless ignorance of a secluded girl. But danger lurked among the very opposites that gave piquancy to love, for Othello failed to comprehend the depth and tenacity of the virtue he adored; and Desdemona was so clear in her own conscience, so ignorant of guile, and so wrapped in the passion that was more than life to her, that she could conceive no possibility of change, and never imagined that her words or deeds could be misinterpreted. What penetration does the poet show into the secret places of the human mind, who thus educes from the noblest virtues a catastrophe which is not excelled in pathos by any production of dramatic literature! In what manner this lamentable result was brought about need

not at the present time concern us. Our chief purpose has been to bring forward into a clear light such points of character and of physical qualities in the hero and the heroine of the play as seem to justify, and indeed make necessary, the suggestions we shall offer respecting the manner of

#### DESDEMONA'S DEATH.

The manner of Desdemona's death is plainly foreshadowed in Othello's soliloquy on his entering her chamber. It was not to be by bloodshed :

" I'll not shed her blood  
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,  
And smooth as monumental alabaster." (V., ii., 5.)

Perhaps, in conformity with this idea, there is in the first Quarto edition the stage-direction, "*Takes off his sword.*"

Whether he had already determined that she should die by suffocation, or whether the burning taper in his hand suggested the employment of such a method, it is evident that he felt the resemblance between the ordinary extinction of such a flame and the dire deed

he was preparing to commit, and whispered to himself those lines which have already been quoted, "Put out the light, and then put out the light," etc.

When Desdemona, awaking from her sleep, hears of what horrid crime she is accused, and pleads, and then struggles for her life, Othello addresses her with,—

"Down, strumpet!"

which denotes that she was not then lying down, and, therefore, not in a posture convenient for inflicting the death he had determined upon; and, as she still resists, he exclaims,—

"Nay, if you strive,"

and then the stage-direction in the first Folio is, "*Smothers her.*" Later on Othello, addressing Gratiano, says,—

"There lies your niece,  
Whose breath, indeed, these hands have newly  
stopped,"

and there is no other mode of death which could, in a case like this, require the use of both hands, except suffocation by pressure on

the chest and mouth. A single hand of Othello would have sufficed to strangle so delicate a woman as Desdemona. The noise made by Emilia at the door causes Desdemona to stir, on which Othello says,—

“Not dead? not yet quite dead?  
I that am cruel, am yet merciful,  
I would not have thee linger in thy pain.  
So, so.” (V., ii., 109.)

Although no stage-direction is inserted here, it is evident that Othello repeats the act by which he intended that Desdemona should die; and this time with so much greater effect that, during the dialogue between himself and Emilia and his own long soliloquy, she gives only such faint signs of resuscitation that he is not obliged to repeat the violence. Yet either the pricking of his conscience, or his unconquered love, or his dread of shame, makes him keenly alive to those semblances of living which even in the really dead seem to give signs of life. But his exclamations, “Ha! no more moving?” “Still as the grave.” “I think she stirs again,” taken in connection with her actual revival, prove that the signs of life he saw were not deceptive.

Desdemona, then, has not entirely lost, or has partially regained, consciousness, and she is aroused further by the announcement of Cassio's being still alive. It snatches her back from the grave into which she had half descended, to protest against the murder either of Cassio or herself, to proclaim herself guiltless, and to pardon her assassin. Whereupon she dies. In closing this brief synopsis of the particulars of Desdemona's death it is impossible not to be reminded of Tyrrell's account of the murder of the princes in the Tower, by suffocation :

" We smothered

The most replenished, sweet work of nature,  
That, from the prime creation, e'er she framed."

(*K. Richard III.*, IV., iii.)

Such are the facts in Shakespeare's version of Desdemona's death; and it is now proposed to inquire how far they conform to the manner of death by suffocation by means of a pillow, which is the agency traditionally employed upon the stage.

To determine this question it is necessary to consult those who have made death, and especially violent death, a subject of special investigation. Among these it is curious to



note that Zacchias, one of the most eminent writers on legal medicine, and who was also a contemporary of Shakespeare, defines death to be "a privation of breathing,"—" *privatio respirationis ipsa mors.*" He enumerates as its signs "immobility, cessation of breathing, coldness, dulness of the eyes, swollen features, and pale skin;" and, although he states that they may be equivocal, he does not, in connection with them or elsewhere, make any allusion to arrest of the heart and pulse as a sign of death. It first came to be so regarded after the discovery of the general circulation had been made. Hence it was natural that Othello should refer only to the cessation of breathing as a sign of Desdemona's death.

Without pausing to consider the subject as it is presented by successive writers on medical jurisprudence from the time of Zacchias to the present day, it is sufficient to cite the more recent authorities upon the subject. Taylor (*Principles and Practice of Medical Jurisprudence*, London, 1865, p. 704; *A Manual of Medical Jurisprudence* (American edition), 1878, p. 436) discusses the modes of death by suffocation. In the former of the two works just mentioned reference is made

to the trial in 1829 of Burke and McDougall, who murdered people and sold the bodies for anatomical purposes. "The victims were commonly destroyed by the assailant resting with his whole weight upon the chest, and at the same time compressing the mouth and nostrils with the hands to prevent the entrance of air." In speaking of death by smothering this author remarks, "The marks of violence may be slight, or even entirely absent." "When," says Guy (*Principles of Forensic Medicine*, 1868, p. 282), "the body is very weak from any cause . . . suffocation is not very difficult to effect, and if not attended by great violence, might not betray itself by the state of the body externally or internally." "Burke," he continues, "destroyed Margery Campbell by sitting on her body, covering her mouth and nostrils with one hand, and applying the other forcibly under the chin." This author, referring to two other cases, remarks, "In both the appearance of the bodies was not such as to lead one to the conclusion that death had happened in this way. The fact that little or no disfigurement was occasioned by this mode of death, and probably no serious injury to any internal organ, renders it

probable that if the assassin had desisted from his work at any point before the complete extinction of life, resuscitation would have been possible." In a case quoted in Wharton and Stillé's *Medical Jurisprudence* (4th ed., iii. 353), Dr. James L. Rogers testified that in "suffocation the breath may be stopped in a minute or a minute and a half, so that a person would cease to struggle and in ten minutes be dead." In other words, apparent death may precede actual death by several minutes, during which, therefore, revival and even recovery is possible. It appears, then, that whatever hinders the air from entering the lungs, or the lungs from receiving air, must tend to produce death, and if its action is sufficiently prolonged may actually cause it.

The extreme debility which occurs in certain diseases may so weaken the muscles of respiration as to occasion death (Inman, in Woodman, *St. Andrew's Trans.*, 1874, p. 152); and if so, then in a certain less degree it may cause apparent death. This is the history of a large proportion of cases of apparent resuscitation from death, even after burial, some of which, indeed, relate to celebrated persons, and is the reason for that excellent regulation

which in some parts of Germany does not permit inhumation before decomposition has begun. The bodies are placed in a special apartment in the cemetery, and so arranged that resuscitation shall at once be made known to the keeper. The differences between real and apparent death are sometimes so slight as to mislead not only untrained persons, but even medical experts, and the question can only be decided by the failure or the success of attempts at resuscitation: "*Lateat scintilla forsan.*" Not to do no more than mention the case of a woman who, in the reign of Henry VI., was hanged for twenty-four hours and survived because her larynx was ossified (Hooper's *Med. Dict.*, quoted in Reid, *The Philosophy of Death*), a long list of historical cases of recovery after apparent death could be paralleled by as many taken from the journals of to-day. Indeed, we may apply to them the epigraph affixed by Missirini to his work on "the danger of burying the living for the dead:" "*Vidimus frequenter ad vitam post conclamata funera redeuntes.*"—QUINTILIANUS.

The mechanism of apparent death by drowning is almost identical with that of

death by compression of the chest, for it acts chiefly by preventing the access of air to the lungs. In the one case the obstacle to the entrance of air is at the external opening of the respiratory apparatus, in the other the lungs themselves are more or less compressed so as to prevent the expansion by which alone air can be drawn into them. Now, it is notorious that many persons have revived from apparent death by drowning, and some of them after a submersion of from a few minutes to three-quarters of an hour. Indeed, one case is reported in which resuscitation took place after two hours of apparent death. (*Amer. Jour. of Med. Sci.*, April, 1867, p. 535.)

Apparent death by hanging has often been followed by recovery in better authenticated cases than the one already cited. The mechanism of this mode of death is not as simple as that of death by arrest of breathing, and yet recovery has occurred after the hanging had lasted for eight minutes. In one instance not only had this interval elapsed, but ten minutes more were consumed in efforts at resuscitation before the pulse and respiration announced the return of life. (White, *Lancet*, December 6, 1884.)

Many years ago, Ashton reported the case of a man whose chest had been crushed between a railway train and a wall, and in which the heart continued to beat for twenty minutes after respiration ceased. (*Lancet*, June, 1861, p. 597.) In this case the point of interest is the proof it affords of the fallacy of respiration as a test of the capacity to live, and the illustration it affords of Othello's error, and which belonged to the age, that death and the absence of breathing are convertible terms.

Besides these several states, many cases of apparent death are recorded of nervous and impressionable females, whose temperament Desdemona's resembled. The attempt we have made to exhibit continuously the high-wrought qualities of her moods and feelings appears to afford sufficient proof of it. Her intense and delicate sensibility was not morbid, but yet so finely attuned that once being "jangled" its music was speedily silenced. This is the less surprising when it is remembered that a powerful emotion may be fatal even to a man presumably of robust constitution; as in the case of the station-master of an Italian railroad, fifty-five years of age, whose station

had been robbed during the night. He became rapidly prostrated, vomited spasmodically, and died within twenty-four hours. (*Times and Gazette*, February, 1868, p. 210.)

The question of the relation of life to breathing has been ingeniously illustrated by M. Piot. In 1882 (*Thèses de Paris*, No. 117), by means of experiments upon dogs, he demonstrated that on cutting off the admission of air into the lungs through the wind-pipe the following effects occurred in succession: extreme difficulty of breathing, with struggling, slowing of the pulse, decline of the general sensibility, etc. After these phenomena had lasted for about five minutes the animals appeared to be dead, but generally they revived by degrees when air was admitted again into their lungs. In one experiment this revival took place after apparent death had lasted for eight minutes. In all of his experiments M. Piot noted that in death by suffocation the heart beats more and more slowly as death approaches. His general conclusion is, "that when an animal is deprived of air a variable period intervenes between life and absolute death, during which, although life seems extinct, death is not complete." Long

ago Bichat described this interval as one "in which animal life is interrupted first, and then sensation, perception, voluntary motion, and the voice are suspended, so that although the animal is externally and apparently dead his heart still beats, and sometimes his pulse also." More recently, Faure described this suspension of animation as follows: "At a given moment all signs of life disappear; but the transition from life to death is very gradual or quite insensible, so that one may very well ask, 'Is this death?' as a few moments before he might have inquired, 'Is this life?'"

On account of their delicate organization, as a general rule, women succumb more readily than men to physical violence. Many as the instances may be of men dying from fear, there have been many more women who died outright from overwhelming terror and even joy. Woman's nervous susceptibility subjects her to the most serious consequences of assaults upon her virtue, her moral sense, her faith, or her honesty. Nothing is more common than her liability to faint from trivial causes, and even without any definite cause at all. It was but natural, therefore, that



Desdemona should faint from the combined effects of terror, humiliation, and despair, added to the physical agency of suffocation; and that this swoon should have saved her from immediate death by suspending or retarding the action of the heart, the organ upon which life most directly depends, or that in the interval she should have presented that "*pallida mortis imago*" which persuaded her lord that the dread sacrifice called for by his wounded honor had been consummated.

If the writer has been successful in expressing the ideas which this discussion inspired, they may be succinctly presented in the following epitome: Othello, a Moor of noble lineage, of middle age, a renowned warrior, a man of great physical power, whose life had been spent in military adventure, inspires with ardent and romantic admiration Desdemona, the only child of her widowed father; a girl delicately brought up and without any experience of the world. He loves her chivalrously, as the strong cherish the weak, and she loves him with the single-hearted devotion of a child-woman incapable of hypocrisy or treachery. By such a man as Othello, and of such a race as his,

the slightest suspicion of infidelity in his wife is sure to be exaggerated and distorted; and when, therefore, he is once persuaded of Desdemona's crime, his love is overborne by his sense of duty, and he dare not shrink from executing justice, though it oblige him to pluck out his right eye or cut off his right hand. To condone the supposed crime would not only disgrace him before the world, but would fill him with self-contempt. His love is never stronger than in the fatal hour when he believes himself the minister of divine justice. We can imagine that it was never so strong as when he looked down upon the innocent but affrighted face of his wife, who vainly sought to find a hold upon the strong heart that had hitherto-been her refuge and the altar of her love. But justice must be done by Othello, and his honor avenged, yet in such a manner as not to betray the executioner, and so as to inflict the least injury and pain upon the victim. The means are at hand: and with the pillow of her couch he smothers her. Othello is so unfamiliar with assassination that he accomplishes it imperfectly, and Desdemona revives sufficiently to exculpate and pardon him. Suffocation is the

only mode of death that is consistent with the closing scene of Desdemona's life. She was young, tender, fragile, and in the highest degree sensitive, and, therefore, overwhelmed by the dreadful indictment brought against her. We may, therefore, conclude that while her youth and delicacy of organization rendered her apt to succumb rapidly to the mode of violence employed by Othello, they also caused her to exhibit more quickly the signs of death which we are entitled also to suppose were magnified by fainting, which might delay, but could not prevent the fatal ending of the tragedy. Out of these elements, partly physical and partly psychical, in Desdemona, and admitting Othello's ignorance of the mechanism of the death he was inflicting, as well as his undying love for the victim he was immolating, it is not only possible, but quite consistent with probability, that after a period of apparent death Desdemona may have temporarily recovered consciousness and the power of speech, as Shakespeare represents her to have done.

## CALDERON.

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IN 1841 was published in Paris a translation by Damas-Hinard of some of Calderon's dramas. One of these, entitled *El Medico de su Honra*,—"The Physician of his own Honor,"—is ranked among the masterpieces of the Spanish dramatist. The French translator and editor says of it, "We do not know where Calderon found the subject of this play; we can only declare it almost impossible that he should have adapted it from any foreign tradition." We propose to show that it may have been borrowed from Shakespeare's *Othello*, not only in certain essentials of its plot, but even in the phraseology of some of its most striking passages.

Calderon de la Barca was born at Madrid in the year 1600. When a young man he

entered the army, and took part in the Spanish campaigns in Italy and the Netherlands. During this period he is said to have devoted himself to dramatic composition. He was noted for the originality of his plots and his literary style; and one of his own countrymen, his collaborator and panegyrist, declared that he drew all his materials from his own imagination. Villenave, from whose article in the *Biographie Universelle* we take this statement, says, "His pieces are wanting in unity and propriety; they are romances that have no probability, are full of extravagant metaphors and whimsical conceits, in a word, of all the exaggerations of a rude and barbarous stage; but they also abound in new and interesting situations, and traits that are brilliant and sometimes sublime, a bustle of action that does not permit the attention to be diverted for a moment, and their plots have a marvellous ingenuity that pleases even when it does not interest." In precisely such terms as these did French critics half a century ago speak of Shakespeare. They preferred a slavish imitation of the Greek drama, in a language which was incapable of reaching the higher regions of the sublime, and were

contented with mock heroics on "a little gravelly Champ de Mars."

We have seen that Damas-Hinard was an admirer of Calderon and translated some of his plays, and we believe that an answer may be made to his remark, that we cannot tell where Calderon found the subject of his play, the title of which has been given above; for not only the main idea of it, but not a few of its incidents and phrases, are borrowed from Shakespeare's Othello, and from two at least of his other works. If this belief is well-founded, it furnishes an answer to the statement of Schlegel, that "the Spanish poets were altogether unacquainted with English." Schlegel continues: "When in two nations differing, in a physical, moral, political, and religious respect, so widely as the English and Spanish, the stages which arose at the same time without being known to each other possess, along with external and internal diversities, the most striking features of affinity, the conjecture will naturally occur, that the same, or at least a kindred, principle must have prevailed in the development of both." (*Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, 1833.) But if of two writers of different na-

tions, the one of whom is slightly posterior in date to the other, the former uses not only a framework like that of his predecessor, but repeats his phrases as nearly word for word as one language can repeat the words of another, then the conclusion is imperative that the later author has not only been inspired by the earlier, but has been well acquainted with his works, and has paid him the homage of using them for his own glory. This, we believe, can be proved to be the case of Calderon's play, "The Physician of his own Honor."

The only part of the plot of this play which it is necessary here to rehearse is as follows: Don Gutierre's wife, Doña Mencía, is courted by the Infante. She does not yield to his suit; but on one of his clandestine visits to her he loses his poniard, and it is found by Don Gutierre, who discovers that it belongs to the Infante. His suspicion once excited, and confirmed by various circumstances, his jealousy becomes so inflamed that he determines to heal his honor by taking the life of Doña Mencía. For this purpose he suborns a physician, who is conducted blindfold to his palace, to bleed Doña Mencía to death.

While Don Gutierre is meditating his crime,

he discovers his wife asleep in the garden. He carries a lighted torch, which he extinguishes, and thus soliloquizes :

“ Put out the light ! I will approach her in a double darkness, deprived of this torch’s light, and of the light of my reason. What a sweet fragrance she exhales ! ” (Day II., sc. v.)

In Othello we have, “ Put out the light, and then—Put out the light.” . . . “ I’ll smell thee on the tree. O, balmy breath ! ” etc.

“ *Doña M.* I try to understand you, and yet, in spite of my endeavor, I understand you not.

*Don G.* Behold a strange thing : when a breath has put out the light another breath may rekindle it. But such is not life ! such is not honor ! alas ! once extinguished they can never be relighted. It is forever.”

This dialogue was unquestionably suggested by Othello’s, “ If I quench thee, thou flaming minister, I can thy former light restore, Should I repent me. But once put out thy light,” etc.

Again : Don Gutierre, determined on his wife’s destruction, rejects the poniard he had at first proposed to use, saying,—



"It behooves not that the public become acquainted with this deed. A private wrong calls for a private vengeance. Doña Mencía shall die in such wise that the cause of her death cannot be divined." (Day III., sc. i.)

So Othello: "I'll not shed her blood," etc., and afterwards, when coward conscience rules him, "Why, how should she be murdered? You heard her say herself it was not I."

Don Gutierre muses: "Though I kill her, at least I would not kill her soul;" and says to her, "Thou hast not more than two hours to live; thou art a Christian, save thy soul; thy life thou canst not." (Day III., sc. iii.)

So, too, Othello says, "I would not kill thy unprepared spirit. No, Heaven forbid! I would not kill thy soul."

The surgeon who performed the bloody sacrifice confessed his crime to the king, and related the dying words of the victim. They were these:

"I am not guilty, I die innocent. May God not call you to account for my death." (Day III., sc. vi.)

Desdemona's last words were, "A guiltless death I die. Commend me to my kind lord."

The passionate self-accusation of Othello,

in which the lines occur, "Whip me, ye devils,  
From the possession of this heavenly sight!  
Blow me about in winds, roast me in sulphur,"  
etc., finds a faint and distorted parallel in  
Don Gutierre's feigned despair:

"Inexorable heaven! Let fall your thunderbolts  
on the most unfortunate of mortals, grind him to  
powder." And, addressing the king, he says, "Turn  
your eyes hither, sire, and behold the darkened sun,  
the moon obscured, the stars turned pale; behold the  
beauty but just now so brilliant, and which has become  
a form without a name; she has carried away with  
her my very soul." (Day III., sc. vi.)

The first portion of this tirade recalls  
Othello's exclamation on learning how he had  
been cozened: "Are there no stones in heaven  
But what serve for thunder?" and the second  
part, in spite of its affectations, reminds one  
of Othello's, "O, insupportable! O, heavy  
hour! Methinks it should be now a huge  
eclipse Of sun and moon; and that the af-  
frighted globe Did yawn at alteration."

These are the only passages in "The Physi-  
cian of his own Honor" which have a strik-  
ing correspondence with some in Othello; but  
at least two others may be cited that have

their parallels, if not originals, in other plays of Shakespeare. The Infante had been stunned by a fall from his horse, and, on regaining consciousness, sees before him Doña Mencia, to whose castle he had been conveyed, and thus addresses her :

“Can I believe my eyes? May this happy vision not dissolve in air! I know not what I say. I know not whether I dream, or talk in my sleep. If I am dreaming, heaven grant that I never may awake. If I am awake, heaven send that I may never sleep again.” (Day I., sc. ii.)

In Calderon's play, “Life is a Dream,” a corresponding passage occurs (Day III., sc. ii.) where Sigismond says, “Lead me, Fortune, to the throne, and if I am sleeping, waken me not; but if I am awake, plunge me not again into sleep.”

So in Twelfth Night (Act IV., sc. i.) Sebastian exclaims,—

“What relish is in this? how runs the stream?  
Or I am mad, or else this is a dream :—  
Let fancy still my sense in Lethe steep:  
If it be thus to dream, still let me sleep.”

Again: Don Gutierre excuses himself to

Doña Mencía for having previously loved another:

“Yes, she pleased me; I found her fair before I had known you; but since I have beheld you I wonder that for a moment she attracted me. Thus the traveller by night admires a star that shines in heaven, but when the sun has risen he turns with contempt from the star that charmed him.” (Day I., sc. ii.)

So, in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (Act II., sc. vi.), Proteus says,—

“O sweet suggesting love, if thou hast sinned,  
Teach me, thy tempted subject, to excuse it.  
At first I did adore a twinkling star,  
And now I worship a celestial sun.”

These passages, occurring in the works of two of the most famous dramatists of their age, and which seem to prove that the later borrowed from the earlier, have not, so far as we can learn, been noticed by the critics or eulogists of the works of either.\* They appear

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\* Although the French translator of Calderon appears to have overlooked the analogies between that author and Shakespeare which we have pointed out, he did make note of the very faint resemblance of a

to be of such interest in themselves that we have ventured to append them to our analysis of a portion of Othello, believing that, if the suggestion be well founded, other inquirers may follow up the clue and be led to further discoveries.

To compare Calderon with Shakespeare would be to liken a dwarf to a giant, or a molehill to a mountain; but, as the dwarf must possess the same form and members, though not the same dimensions as the giant, and the molehill may represent in miniature the mountain, so the Spanish playwright may present some of the lineaments of the English dramatist. Calderon, no doubt, was a genius, but not of the highest order, while Shakespeare stands in unapproachable solitude, towering like Mont Blanc above the snow-clad pinnacles of Switzerland and Savoy. His Lear, Macbeth, Hamlet, and Othello are all complete organizations, as perfect in their in-

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passage in "*La Vida es Sueño*"—"Life is a Dream"—to Prospero's "We are such stuff as dreams are made of." But the resemblance is wholly in the idea, which is not at all an uncommon one, rather than in the form that clothes it.

dividual grandeur, in the relative proportions of their several parts, and in the distinctive unity of their characters, as any productions of nature, so that whatever they say or do appears like the natural and normal outcome of each one as a living man. In this we recognize the supremest mark of genius unconscious of the perfection of its own skill, and obeying only an inward impulse to convert its conceptions into a substantial form. But in Calderon and in nearly all modern dramatists we are often shocked by an artificiality that is apt to destroy sympathy with the heroes of their plays, and may even inspire contempt instead of the admiration they were intended to excite. Thus in the Spanish play of which we have given some account, the immolation of the hero's wife on the altar of honor turns out to be only a vulgar assassination, committed to enable him to marry another woman; and, moreover, he does not scruple in cold blood to lie both as to the motive and the manner of his crime. This, too, he does after manifold protestations of that "honor" which he professes had impelled him to the act.

Equally inconsistent with true honor is the

conduct of Don Lopez in the play "*A secreto Agravio secreta Venganza*,"—"A Secret Vengeance for a Secret Crime,"—in which the dishonored husband, having slain his unfaithful wife and her paramour, and then set fire to his palace, protests before the king that she perished in the conflagration, and laments her death with hypocritical tears, extolling her as "noble, virtuous, upright, proud, honest, and worthy of everlasting fame!"

Shakespeare, we may be sure, was incapable of representing as a hero a man of such moral cowardice and so deliberately base. With a juster conception of the influence of conscious wrong upon a really noble nature, he shows us Othello plunged in the bitterness of unavailing remorse, and offering his own life as a sacrificial atonement for the life he had in his wilfulness and ignorance destroyed.

THE END.













